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Helping Students Connect: Architecting Learning Spaces for Experiential and Transactional Reflection

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Abstract:

Given the complex and varied contexts that inform students' consciousness and occasion their learning, learning spaces are more than physical and virtual spaces. Learning spaces are also a range of situations sedimented in our continuum of experiences that shape our philosophical orientations. As such, this article, written from the perspectives of two faculty members in an English department at a four-year public university, describes our efforts to do the following. First, to draw upon models of instructional design we have experienced in our own educational backgrounds; and equally importantly, to develop learning spaces that support learning that is continuous, situated, and personal. Specifically, we critique the ways in which learning has been segregated from the rest of our life contexts for us throughout our educational histories. The irony is that this de-segregation has motivated us to create diverse learning spaces that provide our students with a more realistic set of tools and techniques for integrative life-long learning.

Keywords: multiple learning spaces, contextualized learning, college writing, integrative life-long learning, and experiential reflective teaching and learning.

Introduction

Learning is the central activity of colleges and universities. Sometimes that learning occurs in classrooms (formal learning); other times it results from serendipitous interactions among individuals (informal learning). Space—whether physical or virtual—can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness. More and more we see the power of built pedagogy (the ability of space to define how one teaches) in college and universities.

We begin with an excerpt from Diana G. Oblinger's (2006) *Learning Spaces* to illustrate the focus of our article and to enrich her understanding of learning and space with our own. Given the complex and varied contexts that inform students' consciousness and occasion their learning, learning spaces are more than physical (classrooms) and virtual (online) spaces; they are sedimented in our continuum of experiences (Dewey, 1938) that shape our philosophical orientations. Our definition of learning spaces comes from our epistemological and ontological perspectives—the ways in which we view the world around us and generate knowledge that shapes us. These have been shaped and reshaped throughout our graduate education as well as through our positions as faculty in higher education.

Because we have determined to bring personal and critical values into what we do as teachers in higher education, our definition of learning spaces focuses on the connections made among three components:

- (1) our life experiences (Who am I? What kinds of experiences do I bring to my education?);
- (2) our academic disciplinary goals (What am I interested in pursuing? What do I want to be?); and
- (3) the needs and goals of our students (Who are the students and what are their goals?).

These connections are critical in seeing and valuing learning as multi-directional rather than as unidirectional, which is often the case in traditional, hybrid, and virtual classrooms. Given our definition and components of learning spaces in higher education, this article, written from the perspectives of two faculty members in an English department at a four-year public university, describes our efforts to develop learning spaces that support learning that is continuous, situated, and personal. Our main goal is to explicate how learning has been (de)contextualized for us throughout our educational histories. We note that our learning has been a critical component in understanding our lived experiences and vice versa. Being reflective about our own learning has led us to create diverse learning spaces that provide our students with a set of tools for integrative life-long learning.

Literature Review

Reynolds-Keefer, Peet, Gurin, Cantor, and Lonn (2012) discuss the critical need to foster integrative knowledge and lifelong learning for students while they journey

through their education in school. On that note, Reynolds-Keefer et al. (2012) state the following:

We recognize that in order to learn for life, students will need to know how to consciously learn from their life experiences. They must learn how to pay attention to subtle 'a-ha' moments, recognizing the insights and dissonance that often accompanies new learning. They will need to know how to work effectively within diverse teams and groups, balancing the needs and views of others while also staying engaged with their own intentions and sources of curiosity.

Teaching our students to learn for life is to further our students' integration of experience beyond the classroom. To this end, we reflect on our own learning and teaching to share our designs.

Particularly now, as virtual learning spaces are added to the spectrum of spaces (including traditional classrooms) in which learning to learn and learning to instrumentalize learning can happen, instructional designers at times find themselves challenged to resist the temptation to implement easy but unsatisfying dualistic designs. Courageously, with their students' interests in mind, instructors have opted in favor of more interactive and integrative alternatives which, due to their complexity and insistence on encouraging 'shared transactional reflection', may prove somewhat more challenging to both ourselves and our students, but challenging in significant and transformative ways (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011, p. 114). Similarly, Rosenblatt (1993) contends that the importance of the social and classroom environment, what the individual writer or reader brings to the activity, and the sensed purpose of the activity, all must be taken into account (p. 384). She argues that 'Collaborative educational methods... would include spoken and written interchange among students, the development of metalinguistic insight into their own and others' linguistic processes, and the building of critical criteria.' In addition, Rosenblatt points out that learners construct meaning interactively and contextually, working with elements that originate both inside and outside a given learning space: '[The] individual is implicated in the social. But always there is an individual human being choosing, selectively constructing meaning, and consciously or unconsciously responding in terms of the factors, contextual and human, entering into that particular transaction' (Rosenblatt, 1993, pp. 384-385).

More importantly, we as faculty must be mindful of certain learning spaces and activities that short-change opportunities we have to promote to our students the critical intellectual habits of, as Kristine Johnson has recently listed them, 'curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence [particularly in the face of uncertainty and confusion], responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition' (Johnson, 2013, p. 518). It is clear from extensive research that learning space designs that do not foster independent individual curiosity, motivation, and integrative learning in students not only deny students opportunities to engage with learning in critical ways, they can also result in further disconnection between students' lived realities and the experiences they undergo in their education (Horton, 2011), and ultimately in their ever day world. In fact, such designs put students at risk of becoming alienated from the very

communities of discourse, representatives of which ostensibly accepted them as future practitioners in democratic processes of knowledge evolution! Elaborating on her statement that a learning environment is 'a visible container of human action: at times oppressive or liberating, beautiful or ugly,' Ayers (2010, pp. 62-63) argues that, ideally,

life is breathed into [learning spaces] by people who have certain ideas in mind, specific beliefs to enclose. And that's what makes [learning spaces] more than background, more than floor and walls and ceiling. That's what makes each a whole ecology of intention—the human embodiment of thought and value (Ayers, 2010, p. 63).

Thus, it has been our aim to draw multiple layers of learning spaces (traditional, virtual, and experiential) into what we do as teachers. According to Ayers' *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* (2010), a learning space 'must be sufficiently broad and varied to challenge a range of interests and abilities, and yet focused enough to offer students some coherent rhythms and goals' (p. 61). In other words, these learning spaces are multilayered and multidimensional contexts in which knowledge is socially created via experiences that both teachers and students bring to construct further experiences and knowledge. As such, the multiple learning spaces we implement are based on where our philosophical perspectives come from and how they are shaped by our experiences. These have been facilitated by situations, interactions, and other experiences (whether positive or negative) throughout our lives. We want to delineate that our experiences juxtaposed with the type of education received have both enhanced and hindered learning that has been the assumed goal of education. We further acknowledge and are guided by John Dewey's (1938) work that not all experiences are educative in nature; any experiences are potentially mis-educative in the sense that each 'has the effect of arresting and distorting the growth of further experience' (p. 25); they can steer students away from what occurs in traditional and virtual learning spaces. For instance, with the advancement of instructional technology, more programs and courses are being offered either hybrid or online, which may work in terms of increasing the institution's economic gain without taking into full consideration how online courses should be taught and who can teach certain courses online. In addition, not all hybrid/online experiences can be said to have beneficial outcomes for students, who may desire or learn best from lessons/learning experiences conducted with more palpable materials in a shared physical space.

It is important to share with our students and faculty colleagues the types of experiences that have led us to our choices to teach in certain ways. The purpose in sharing is to promote the students' experiences that can help them to question the ways in which learning occurs in spaces which they enter. Dewey further contends that the focus should be on the 'quality' or the 'power' of the experience, and comments that it is the responsibility of the educator to 'arrange for the kind of experiences which... promote having desirable future experiences' (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). In keeping with this line of thought, then how do we understand 'quality' and 'power' to apply to students' experiences in an effort to empower students to personally engage with their educations at the level of design? To define these terms in action, we specifically

look at writing courses and how writing can be taught and modelled using synchronously multimodal learning spaces.

In particular, both writers have implemented three instructional design features intended to encourage integrative learning. We have designed learning spaces that (a) focus on and honor the language students initially bring to the table, (b) model for and guide students toward positive intellectual habits associated with critical thinking and academic integrity and (c) provide students with a sustaining sense of connection to a supportive learning community always wanting to hear from them, always ready to help them negotiate between their home language and the language forms of the academy.

Merging of Traditional, Virtual, and Experiential Learning Spaces

Due to space limitation, in this article, we each focus on one of the undergraduate courses we teach in our English Department to describe how traditional, virtual, and experiential learning spaces come together within a course designed by each of us. This discussion is intertwined with our brief reflections on our own educational journeys.

How it all began for Author 1

In its general outline, my online research-based undergraduate Advanced Composition course remains much like an earlier version I taught for the first time in 1996. The tools my students and I used in those early days were, in fact, very close to the ones we use today. We used a learning management system, and we made liberal use of its features, most notably its file management, email, and threaded discussion tools.

Eighteen years later, I am still using a learning management system to organize the course; however, I have made a few changes in just how I use it. These changes that have everything to do with the purpose of inviting my students into a learning community that espouses curiosity, openness, rigorous critique, respect for competing perspectives, as well as a sense of praxis through which one synthesizes theory and action into real world agency.

In pursuit of this purpose I have added two crucial components to the space that were not part of the course environment back in '96 and which have turned out to be the most significant game changers for integrative student learning: a class wide wiki and real time chat to support students' research and writing processes.

My reasons for these changes in how I weave these Web 2.0 technologies into the virtual learning space of my online Advanced Composition courses came from my commitment to building multilayered and multidimensional contexts in which students may learn and practice new and demanding intellectual habits while feeling (and here is the key) safe, supported, and valued for themselves.

Autobiographically speaking, my own experience as a student of English was transformed in high school by a single assignment. When I was a sophomore in high school, my English teacher asked the class to keep a daily journal. In our journals we

could write whatever we liked. Our teacher collected our journals each Friday and returned them to us the next Monday. When we opened our notebooks again, we could see that he had conscientiously and compassionately commented in the margins of our pages, not much, but enough to know that we had been heard.

It was actually that dialog between myself and my teacher which took place in the pages of my journal that created an atmosphere of trust that supported the rest of my participation in that course and beyond. The sense of a kind, respectful and giving audience of my loosest, most provisional thinking, my most tentative connections, even my most circular cogitations, stayed with me, internalized, even after my teacher and I fell out of touch.

This atmosphere of trust in which a writer feels relaxed and comfortable enough to take risks, to make connections between their home and school experiences, and to develop a sense of relationship and rapport with the members of a learning community concerned to find relevance in all experience, is what I wish for my students. Their ability to do these things largely depends on the relationship of trust that develops between us and within the larger class space, as well as their ability to access diverse information and enjoy serendipitous learning experiences, and reflect on those experiences, all of which our use of a wiki and synchronous chat in Advanced Composition allows.

My students have no shortage of cares and commitments. They care about their health; they care about their educations and the content of their major academic programs; they care about their future employment, they care about their families. However, they are not always sure how the critical themes of their lived experience may find expression in academic discourse, or in what ways expression of these themes in academic discourse might enrich their commitments to these themes. Most of these concerns stem rather more from anxiety than curiosity, which, although a fine starting point or goad to critical investigation, is better superseded by a relaxed attention, as well as a sense of flexibility, once research and writing processes are engaged. When that happens, real creative thinking can occur.

To supply two examples of this sort of development, I can recall one student, who began our course wondering whether to submit his child to vaccinations, and who ultimately wrote a persuasive essay in which he assessed scientific arguments for a positive correlation between vaccinations and occurrences of Autism. Another student I remember, wondering how he might break in to the design industry, ultimately wrote his researched essay to weigh the challenges and opportunities presented by that field. In helping these students develop these projects, my challenge as their teacher was to leverage, in the interest of serving the curricular objectives of our writing course, their curiosity and motivation around these topics that emerged from the larger contexts of their lives. When all goes well, a loop is seen: the research, writing, and critical thinking skills students develop while working on their projects come back to refine and deepen their curiosity and more powerfully channel their motivation to learn more. Students feel their expertise grow in ways that are obviously relevant to themselves. And they like how that feels.

In this Advanced Composition class, therefore, students do their writing on individual wiki pages everyone in the class can see (as they can see and learn from other students' pages), but on which other students are permitted to comment only at certain times and only in certain spots. Meanwhile, students and I interact frequently and regularly within and around a scaffolded sequence of writing activities, including periodic freewriting, the writing of citations and summaries of source materials, transcribing an interview with an outside expert, and outlining and drafting their papers. All of this writing, although added to their wiki page incrementally, can be scrolled at once, a running record of their investigation, snapshots of their minds at work at different points in its evolution.

Although more public than a diary, students' wiki pages provide a zone of safety and support in which they and I dialog as they work and I, gently and gradually, attempt to guide them toward more shaded and sophisticated descriptions, evaluations and presentations. The instructional dialog on the wiki page is supplemented, in real time, with synchronous chat, which I keep running during my office hours and other times I am online. Together, the wiki page and the chat constitute a communication channel that reminds me very much of that journal assignment that was so pivotal to me in high school, and seldom fails to afford students a greater sense of intellectual confidence, independence, and palpable relevance than they likely have felt before.

How it all began for Author 2

As an immigrant child being schooled in the late 70s in an urban context, my learning space consisted of a traditional classroom where a mastery of English linguistic code was a prerequisite to entering other types of learning spaces as mandated by teachers and administrators. Three decades later, I am still in so-called traditional classrooms in a higher education institution located in western Pennsylvania, but today the learning spaces in which I am involved are somehow co-constructed and negotiated by me, my students, and the world around us. My educational journey has always been a mirror for me in shaping how I see learning spaces for myself and my students. Therefore, I don't want to create courses that had been created for me as an English language learner and second language writer in the 70s; spaces that were dis-connected from my own set of identities as a learner. I want my students to look inward to find the space within them where learning was first fueled, seeing the inner self as a starting point in a life-long learning journey. In this way, learning spaces are not just seen as a transmitter or a bank of knowledge, but spaces where knowledge can be co-constructed, negotiated, and resisted as a way to bring together the personal and political in higher education.

Beginning in fall 2008, my first semester as an assistant professor in the English Department, I was assigned three sections of ENGL 202: Research Writing. As a way to integrate my identity into my teaching, I reflected on how I learned to write: In my mind I went as far back as my undergraduate years at Boston University in 1985. As a pre-med student trying to become a medical doctor, my main goal was to do the minimum to pass the required writing courses. 'I never really focused on how a writing course in my undergraduate years would impact the ways in which I saw the world.'

Much had changed since then, so, in framing my course to reflect my current commitments, I thought broadly about how issues of diversity and social (in)justice have influenced my worldview and how I understood the construction of knowledge.

I conceptualized my new course, 'Researching Writing: Raising Awareness of Diversity and Social Justice Issues within and beyond our Lives' so that the students could engage in a variety of activities designed to hone their research literacy skills using readings related to issues of diversity and social justice I wanted the activities of the course to help my students engage and interrogate our ever-changing world, a world complicated with issues of race, gender, class, language, and other social categories. My teaching goals were to help students challenge the societal level discourses that continue to privilege some and marginalize others. These goals would take their shape in designing a research project, collecting data, analyzing data results, and writing the final research project. As such, I brought the students' experiential learning into their traditional learning space. Throughout the semester, I hoped to create a space where they could gain a sense of cooperation and community working together in exploring the writing and research process, but also coming to understand the importance of promoting issues of diversity and social justice in our lives as agents of change.

In order to bring the traditional, virtual, and experiential learning spaces together, I designed the following required assignments. First, I wanted students to share with me how they positioned themselves within/experienced the issues of diversity and social justice issues. So, I had them construct their own Diversity Autobiographical Narratives, which consisted of responding to prompts focused on how they understand and experience issues of diversity and social (in)justices. Second, students had opportunities to write freely in the course blog regarding what they read and discussed in the course. Third, students formed groups to facilitate presentation/discussion around selected topics focused on racism, sexism, classism, etc. Finally, the students worked on different components of their Social Justice Inquiry Project by devoting time to securing a topic they are passionate about as well as connecting it to their disciplinary major, doing library research, writing annotated bibliographies, designing their study to begin collecting data, drafting each section (i.e., literature review, method of inquiry, results, discussion, conclusion, and reflections), receiving teacher and peer-feedback, drafting for a second round, and making final revisions.

Our Lessons Learned and Implications for Teaching

Reflecting on our own implementations of teaching and how our students responded to our teaching and our courses in general, in this section we share what we have learned from the implementation of our 'self in pedagogy.'

First, almost all students liked the fact that they were given opportunities to choose their own topics for their writing projects, particularly when they came to see how any artefacts (in some classes we may ask students to begin their thinking about the complexity of interpretation by comparing their personal associations to common objects: we then move their attention to the scenes of written texts, to approach words in the same vein) can be seen to resonate with meaning in a variety of contexts. Some students found that having a choice did not work since, according to them, they

had always been told what to write in English classes and felt lost in finding a topic that had a personal and academic connection. Moreover, some students were sceptical about how they would eventually complete an empirical research study, as this was the very first time for most of them to conduct their own research projects. Our lesson learned here is that as writing instructors, we need to privilege students' academic goals when designing our writing courses. This principle, experiential learning, should be privileged over whether a course should be online, hybrid, or both.

Second, our student evaluations indicated that scaffolding strategies and chunking final paper projects helped students visualize their projects and focus on the process of research rather than an unattainable perfect end product. This shift in perception allowed them to see that many of their uncertainties were intrinsic to that process and to their own evolutions as practitioners. Most of our students came to understand writing as a process-oriented activity. Many students were relieved that their writing assignments throughout the semester, ultimately, led to the final writing project for the course. Our lesson learned here is that, as writing instructors, explicit discussion of the process-based approach to writing is a must.

Third, as less experienced hybrid/online writing instructor (author 2), author 2 learned from author 1, a veteran hybrid/online writing instructor, navigating the synchronously multimodal learning spaces of writing is a complex process. Promoting online/hybrid pedagogy is more than teaching from home--it is an alternative to teaching face to face teaching. Our commitment to upholding critical pedagogy and promoting student empowerment using multiple learning spaces in our teaching of writing is a testament to how we position writing and the teaching of writing for our undergraduate students within and beyond higher education contexts.

Meaningful, readable, galvanizing writing (often called 'effective' writing) is writing that resonates with writer and reader both. To learn to write meaningfully, readably, and affectingly, students must successfully negotiate between their own sense of what they have to say and the expressive possibilities of available linguistic resources, remaining open to the interplay of intention and execution, and open to following their language where it leads. And because writing takes time, because it slows one down, it is a perfect practice for developing intellectual traits consistent with Johnson's recommended habits of 'curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition' (Johnson, 2013, p. 518). But along with the opportunity must come steadfast and consistent support, particularly in online learning spaces where student motivation easily lags.

Grounded in the vision for promoting a teacher-scholar model, a cornerstone for initiating student-centered and scaffolded writing inquiry, our course designs and their implementations will enable us to make a significant contribution to the field of inquiry-based writing using multi-layered learning spaces in higher education. The writing of this article in explicating the learning spaces in higher education in general and merging of multi-layered learning spaces in writing courses in particular is an initial step toward promoting the vision we have for undergraduate writing courses.

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Key Pedagogic Thinkers

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Introduction/Background

Who is Dave?

Dave Cormier of the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada is renowned for coining the term MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) and for developing the notion of rhizomatic learning. In January 2014, he facilitated a MOOC entitled 'Rhizomatic learning: the community is the curriculum' (popularly known as #rhizo14 – the hashtag used on Twitter and Facebook for it), in which we (Maha and Sarah) were participants.

How was this interview conducted?

Since Dave lives in Canada, Maha lives in Egypt, and Sarah lives in Scotland, this was not a traditional interview. Maha conducted this interview with Dave rhizomatically (see below for explanation of rhizomatic), starting on Google docs, Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, Maha crowdsourced part of this interview by inviting anyone who was interested in asking questions to pose those questions on her blog (Bali, 2014b) or on Twitter using the hashtag #askjpd, and Dave Cormier answered those